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Facebook Changes Inspire More Grumbling

By DAVID POGUE

Facebook recently redesigned its site, moving things around and adding new elements. Of course, Facebook frequently fiddles with its features, and these fixes frequently infuriate its fans.

This time, though, the changes have done more than ruffle a few feathers; they've practically plucked the chickens.

A poll run by the social media news blog Mashable found that 75 percent of Facebook fans "hate" the redesign. The new Facebook fared even worse on the poll site Sodahead, where 86 percent gave the changes a thumbs down.

Of course, any time a company with 800 million active customers makes a change, a certain predictable percentage of them go ballistic. The wails of protest have become just another cherished phase of the cycle. If you don't like change, technology may be the wrong field for you.

Do the Facebook changes justify all the teeth-gnashing? Here's a rundown of what's come out recently, and what's coming soon — and one man's verdict on each one's true wail-worthiness.

THE TIMELINE The new Facebook Timeline view is still in private testing; you, the public, won't get to see it for a couple more weeks. For now, it's optional. Eventually, it will replace your existing Profile page — thus the griping. But this time, change is good.

In essence, it's a timeline of your life, depicted on a vertically scrolling page. Now is at the top; your birth is at the bottom. Facebook generates it automatically, using your recent news and life events to populate it; the farther back you go in time, the more Facebook condenses events. You can manually expand or compress various phases of your life, and you can manually add or remove events. (That's fortunate. Otherwise, the entire period before you

joined Facebook would be a big boring blank.)

Because the Timeline displays photos alongside the news and events of your life, it can eventually become a rich visual record of your life — or at least the parts you want to make public.

Now, if you're the kind of person who doesn't see the appeal of Facebook in the first place — “Why on earth would I want to make the intimate details of my life public on the Internet!?” — then the Timeline will only amplify your bafflement.

But for regular Facebookers, the Timeline serves a real purpose. For example, if you got engaged a few months ago, only the Facebook regulars among your fans might know it. Oh, they could keep clicking More, More, More, to summon older and older posts you'd made — but how would they even know to do that?

Now there's a way for them to see the arc of your life in a visual, entertaining way — a genuinely useful online tool that nobody's carried out in quite this way before.

TOP STORIES The new Top Stories feature, on the other hand, isn't nearly as successful.

If you haven't visited your Facebook page in awhile, you'll have missed a lot of your friends' news updates — some of which might have been important. Facebook's concern was that once those updates had scrolled away, you'd never know they existed.

Therefore, when you log in now, Facebook places stories it considers to be important right at the top — big stories you haven't seen, no matter how old they are. Below these “important” posts, you'll find the traditional, infinitely scrolling, strictly chronological list of news. (There were two similar lists before — Top Stories and Recent News — but you had to switch between them manually. Plenty of people never bothered, and missed important information as a result.)

Facebook fanatics object to the Top Stories scheme on several grounds. First, what constitutes “important”? Facebook says that it chooses Top Stories based on things like which of your friends posted them, how many Likes and Comments they've received, and so on. But some Facebookworms don't like the idea that somebody else — Facebook's algorithms — chooses which stories to put into this top-of-page area.

Second, the Top Stories concept means that you might see three-day-old stories above one-hour-old stories, which doesn't seem quite right.

And third, it's just plain confusing, on a site that's already pretty confusing. You have had to figure out that there are two different sides of your own Facebook site: the Wall, where you post news for your friends and fans and they leave notes for you, and the News Feed, where you read everyone else's posts. (There are no buttons with those names, so how do you get to those pages? You click your own name to see your Wall; you click the Facebook logo to see the News Feed.)

And now that News Feed page is further subdivided between Top News and Recent Stories: Ugh.

THE TICKER On the right side of the News Feed screen, there's a new scrolling list of lighter-weight, real-time updates posted by your friends (or by Facebook apps they've installed). This Ticker lets you know what music your friends are listening to, who's made friends with whom and which friends have clicked the Like button for what. You can respond to these updates in a bubble that pops out when you point to the Ticker, so you never have to leave your main page.

(Instead of just clicking "Like" here, you can also say you've "Watched," "Read" or "Listened" — providing data to Facebook that's far more specific than the generic "Like," and therefore much more appealing to its advertisers.)

The Ticker may be interesting to those shockingly numerous Facebook fans who spend hours a day on the site. But if you don't care for it — for example, if you find that the constant scrolling animation brings unwelcome distraction when you're trying to read — you can hide it with a click. (Unless you can't. Sometimes, it just moved over when I tried to hide it; Facebook has confirmed that it's a bug, which will be fixed shortly.)

SUBSCRIPTIONS Many of the changes are simply Facebook catch-up. It used to be that you couldn't see my posts, for example, unless I friended you. Now, I can permit the masses to "subscribe" to my utterances without friending or knowing them — an idea Facebook has cheerfully borrowed from Twitter.

FRIEND LISTS Facebook has also been busy borrowing ideas from Google.

No matter how many times Facebook overhauled its privacy settings, they were always complex and controversial. Google recently exploited that weakness when it unveiled Google Plus, its Facebook rival. There, each time you post some news item, you get a pop-up menu that controls who gets to see it: Family, Best Buddies, Work Folk, Everyone or whatever. Maybe that's more effort, but it's clear as day.

Now Facebook works exactly the same way. A new pop-up menu appears right in the “What’s on your mind?” box, listing whatever Lists of friends you’ve set up. (Lists had been on Facebook for awhile, but in a little-used form.)

Facebook also starts you off with a few Smart Lists, composed of people who went to your college, people who work at the same company or people you’ve marked as your best friends.

Just as on Google Plus, Friend Lists are a terrific, simple idea. Not only do they make it clear who’s going to see your update, but they’ve permitted Facebook to redesign its privacy settings pages yet again — this time, resulting in true simplicity.

The bottom line: The recent Facebook changes really do make things both better (Timeline, Friend Lists, Subscriptions) and worse (Top Stories, Ticker).

If you’ve been participating in the online gripefest, well, you have a point.

On the other hand, if you hate the new design, look at the bright side: it’s only a matter of time before Facebook changes its design again.

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